

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

August 18, 1961

Dear Mayor Brandt:

I have read with great care your personal informal letter of August 16th and I want to thank you for it. In these testing days it is important for us to be in close touch. For this reason I am sending my answer by the hand of Vice President Johnson. He comes with General Clay, who is well known to Berliners; and they have my authority to discuss our problems in full frankness with you.

The measures taken by the Soviet Government and its puppets in East Berlin have caused revulsion here in America. This demonstration of what the Soviet Government means by freedom for a city, and peace for a people, proves the hollowness of Soviet pretensions; and Americans understand that this action necessarily constitutes a special blow to the people of West Berlin, connected as they remain in a myriad of ways to their fellow Berliners in the eastern sector. So I understand entirely the deep concerns and sense of trouble which prompted your letter.

Grave as this matter is, however, there are, as you say, no steps available to us which can force a significant material change in this present situation. Since it represents a resounding confession of failure and of political weakness, this brutal border closing evidently represents a basic Soviet decision which only war could reverse. Neither you nor we, nor any of our Allies, have ever supposed that we should go to war on this point.

Yet the Soviet action is too serious for inadequate responses. My own objection to most of the measures which have been proposed -- even to most of the suggestions in

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your own letter -- is that they are mere trifles compared to what has been done. Some of them, moreover, seem unlikely to be fruitful even in their own terms. This is our present judgment, for example, on the question of an immediate appeal to the United Nations, although we shall continue to keep this possibility under lively review.

On careful consideration I myself have decided that the best immediate response is a significant reinforcement of the Western garrisons. The importance of this reinforcement is symbolic -- but not symbolic only. We know that the Soviet Union continues to emphasize its demand for the removal of Allied protection from West Berlin. We believe that even a modest reinforcement will underline our rejection of this concept.

At the same time, and of even greater basic importance, we shall continue and accelerate the broad buildup of the military strength of the West upon which we are decided, and which we view as the necessary answer to the long-range Soviet threat to Berlin and to us all.

Within Berlin, in the immediate affairs of the city, there may be other specific appropriate steps to take. These we shall review as rapidly and sympathetically as possible, and I hope you will be sure to express your own views on such measures clearly to Vice President Johnson and his party. Actions which effectively demonstrate our continued commitment to freedom in Berlin will have our support.

I have considered with special care your proposal of a three-power status for West Berlin. My judgment is that a formal proclamation of such a status would imply a weakening of the four-power relationship on which our opposition to the border-closing depends. Whatever may be the immediate prospects, I do not believe that we should

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now take so double-edged a step. I do agree that the guarantees which we have pledged to West Berlin should be continuously affirmed and reaffirmed, and this we are doing. Moreover, I support your proposal of an appropriate plebiscite demonstrating the continuing conviction of West Berlin that its destiny is freedom in connection with the West.

More broadly, let me urge it upon you that we must not be shaken by Soviet actions which in themselves are a confession of weakness. West Berlin today is more important than ever, and its mission to stand for freedom has never been so important as now. The link of West Berlin to the Free World is not a matter of rhetoric. Important as the ties to the East have been, painful as is their violation, the life of the city, as I understand it, runs primarily to the West -- its economic life, its moral basis, and its military security. You may wish to consider and to suggest concrete ways in which these ties might be expanded in a fashion that would make the citizens of West Berlin more actively conscious of their role, not merely as an outpost of freedom, but as a vital part of the Free World and all its enterprises. In this double mission we are partners, and it is my own confidence that we can continue to rely upon each other as firmly in the future as we have in the past.

With warm personal regards,

Sincerely,

The Honorable Willy Brandt  
Governing Mayor of Berlin

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